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Learning from Respect: Multiple Iterations of Respect in the Classroom

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> "Respect is an attitude. It entails taking seriously and valuing what someone else or multiple others bring to an encounter. It demands openness and receptivity, it calls for willingness to consider experiences or perspectives that are different from our own, and it often requires a withholding of judgment."
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> – Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 2
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> "[The zone of proximal development is a concept that] permits us to delineate the child's immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing."
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> -Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87

Educators and students alike will agree that respect is essential to a productive classroom, and whether they use the formal term or not, many know that the zone of proximal development — the space in which learners are at once challenged and advanced past that edge — is the most conducive to learning. However, concepts such as "openness" and the practice of "taking each other seriously" mean different things to different people, and intentionally creating zones of proximal development for students is difficult work.

Before engaging in a student-faculty partnership through Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), I expected to learn about the practice of respect in the classroom and in the context of my relationship with the new faculty member with whom I had been paired for a partnership during his first semester teaching at Bryn Mawr. Learn I did, but I had not anticipated how complicated a concept respect from a faculty member to a student would become for me.

My partnership created a space for me to explore the boundaries and iterations of respect between student, professor, and my own role as a TLI consultant. This space would turn out to be a zone of proximal development for me and would help me think through how to support my faculty partner in creating the same kind of space for his students.

Nurturing Respect in the Zone of Proximal Development

Complicating the binary and hierarchy of professor and students is at the core of TLI. Partnerships that place undergraduates in the role of consultants to faculty members create processes that inherently require reciprocal respect and shared responsibility. Fostering this mutual respect and responsibility takes time because it is rare for student voice to be legitimized in such a formal manner. Variables like the subject of study in a course that is the focus of the partnership, the age and experience of the students enrolled in the course, and the prior

experiences of faculty influence how respect is conceptualized and enacted. Furthermore, as a liberal arts college of around 1,300 students and as a women's college, Bryn Mawr has an institutional culture all to itself. Teacher-learner respect has a different flavor here at Bryn Mawr than at another school even in the Quaker consortium, and learning these everyday conventions of this place contributed to my faculty partner's and my thinking about our own relationship along with thinking about respect in the classroom.

My partnership placed me in an introductory course with a majority of first-year students. My partner and I dedicated much of our time together to asking ourselves how, when, and if he should "push" his students. There are a ton of ways I've heard educators and students tackle the question of "challenging students," of "setting the bar high enough," or of "pushing students to 'go' further." The act of challenging students, especially at a women's college, is difficult to pin down; we often talk about it, but rarely can we say what respectful challenge looks like in actual praxis. Thinking about respect in this context, I learned that the relationship between "pushing" and "taking seriously" is not a distant one. In fact, critique and respect are linked and should go hand in hand.

Respect in this sense has been a part of my life since I was young. Early on in my educational trajectory, my parents would constantly ask, "Leah, are you being challenged?" and I knew they were referring to class materials and the interactions I had with my teachers. Then, it seemed fairly simple. It was a question of whether or not my teachers were teaching skills, facts, or words that I already knew, as opposed to asking me to move beyond where I was certain and comfortable, to wrestle with what I didn't know, to try — and maybe fail — at something new.

When I arrived at Bryn Mawr as a first-year student last year, my Critical Issues in Education class introduced me to a psychological term for what my parents had emphasized all along: L.S. Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), which I bring forth in my second epigraph. Vygotsky conceives of the ZPD as three concentric circles, each representing a different state of mind for learners. The innermost circle represents a figurative area in which learners can do tasks unaided, and the outermost circle represents the tasks the learner cannot perform at all. The zone of proximal development is situated in between these two zones, where learners can accomplish tasks with the aid of a teacher, but not alone. The goal for both teachers and learners should be to be in this zone of proximal development as often as possible.

TLI partnerships require that student consultants think about themselves as learners without assuming what works for them will work for all other students. I knew from the get-go that what works for me as a learner cannot always be writ large for others. So part of my work with my faculty partner was to analyze what would work for the students in his course — what would place them in their own ZPDs? This question intersected with our discussions of the importance of teachers being explicit regarding expectations for students.

I am a firm believer in teaching students academic standards that often go unspoken or overlooked in curriculum. However, this process of being told what one has done — or, more often, not done — to meet standards is not always pleasant, especially for first-year students and especially from someone they look up to and respect. It looks like getting papers back with millions of comments and challenges from other authors, or being disappointed with the first

exam grade. But when handled transparently by professors, these experiences can create opportunities for students to work in the zone of proximal development and can be the most formative in a student's academic trajectory. And as I would come to learn, such experiences created by professors demonstrate respect.

My partner and I would often ask "Are we asking too much of students?" (Are the readings too challenging?; Should we praise students when their analyses can be deeper in light of other class materials?; How does one grade a paper by a English language learner that contains beautiful ideas but extremely flawed grammar and word choice?) As a women's college and as a liberal arts college, Bryn Mawr is all about meeting its students where they come in and nurturing the development of empowered, self-actualized thinkers, but empowerment cannot come from praise alone. Professors demonstrate and enact their respect for their students when they engage, challenge, and question them.

A Professor's Respect for Students

As my work with my faculty partner progressed, I found myself affirming his instincts about respect: to ask his students to write more compellingly, to analyze more deeply, to read more closely. When I've had classes in the past in which I wasn't being asked or even pushed into the zone of proximal development, where real generative learning could occur, I would leave with an unsatiated feeling. Before my TLI partnership, though, I wouldn't have been able to put my finger on why I felt this way. Even if that wasn't my previous teachers' intentions, I did not feel as if what I brought to the course and what I developed within it was taken as seriously as I had hoped.

Part of what clarified all of this for me was the relationship my faculty partner and I developed and, in particular, the respect he showed me. Whether we like it or not, power dynamics are constantly at play in the classroom. My partner is a white cis-gendered man with a PhD and a CV that was enough to make me shake in my boots (only before we met, that is). Before he demonstrated that he respected me with both positive and critical feedback, it felt weird and uncomfortable to enter into the zone of proximal development with him in the relationship that TLI partnerships create —not quite peers, not quite between student and professor. Once he demonstrated that respect — demanded more of me as well as acknowledged what I brought to the partnership — I felt myself move into the ZPD.

It became quite clear to me why respect is such a commonly used word in circles of progressive education. In almost every potential action a professor undertakes with his students, he is presented with a question of how to respect them. Opportunities for productive and respectful challenges arise in grading, classroom interactions, assignments themselves, office hours, and in campus interactions. A perhaps misguided notion of feminism would dictate that a male professor respect his female students by accounting for the level at which students come in and trying to praise those skills into development. I argue this would represent a certain form of disrespect for the students. Instead, a professor should respect his students enough to imagine with them their bright futures that can only be realized through significant challenge, one that will ultimately lead to genuine development.

Students' Respect for Their Professors

In elementary school, we were always taught to respect our teachers. Where I am from, this was demonstrated through "Yes ma'am," "No sir," and sitting quietly. While respect at a young age comes from teachers' power over their students on the axes of age, perceived intelligence, and education, respecting one's professors in college becomes more complex. I attended four sessions of the New Faculty Pedagogy Seminar, in which new faculty at Bryn Mawr and Haverford have the option to participate, in my capacity as a student consultant, and it was awesome to hear the lengths to which the new faculty went to be good at their jobs.

I knew from one-on-one meetings with my faculty partner that he would go above and beyond to care for each of his students in a very holistic way, and hearing similar stories of genuine concern and reflexivity on the behalf of twelve other new faculty members gave me renewed respect for my own professors. The binary between student and professor can lend itself to frustration when things do not go as one party would like. When I saw how badly one professor wanted to learn her students' names or how concerned another professor was with the impact his exam had on his students' ability to learn, I came to understand some of the perceived poor pedagogical strategies I have experienced in the past. In other words, I learned to respect my professors because I had such concrete evidence for how hard they were trying.

Now I do not wish to advocate here for two different forms of respect depending on the receiving party. Just as a professor's respect for his students gives him permission to challenge them, students' respect for their teachers is necessary for and can facilitate the improvement of pedagogical strategy.

Final Thoughts

Respect can be tricky with the power dynamic between professor and student, but if respect is truly an attitude, and students openly acknowledge their professor's willingness for self-improvement, respect from student to professor can be just as productive and important as its professor-to-student counterpart. This manifested in my faculty partnership quite quickly because by virtue of his choice to engage in a TLI partnership, we both knew he was interested in developing his skills as a professor. Because of this, we were able to proceed and take each other seriously and engage in a relationship of mutual and generative respect. Respect that pushes people into their own zones of proximal development, although not easy to cultivate, leads to more generative work together, critique, and partnerships.

References

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